

A New Leaf

And Other Stories



Jack Ritchie

INTRODUCTION

Donald E. Westlake

A DELL BOOK

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LIVING BY DEGREES

"You wouldn't happen to know where I can find some curare?" Ronnie asked.

"No," I said firmly.

"It works quite fast. I wouldn't want you to suffer."

"Thank you so much."

Ronnie has recently indicated a desire to murder me because I also bear the name of Maxtersen.

He sighed and put away the chessboard.

I always beat him at chess. It is not that he is a chess player or that I am a chess player—as a matter of fact, I regard serious chess players as accountants with delusions of intelligence—but the fact remains that I beat him consistently and it revitalizes my ego.

Ronnie is thirteen and I am fifty-seven and the university authorities have, in their whimsy, chosen to make us roommates.

"I can't see any other way out," Ronnie said. "I've simply got to kill you. My father left me only enough money to see me through one year of college and that's just about down the drain now."

"Murder is much too drastic a solution," I said. "Surely you ought to be able to capture a scholarship of some kind?"

He shook his head. "All the available scholarships specify that the recipient must be at least sixteen years of age."

"Then I'm afraid that you'll simply have to go back to Mr. and Mrs. Wicker and wait for the ripening years."

The Wickers have been Ronnie's guardians since his parents perished in a plane crash two years ago.

The very thought depressed him. "It's a cold, cold house and Mr. Wicker wears rimless glasses and I make him nervous."

I would have felt more pity for the boy, but when a

half a million dollars is also involved, one's pity has the tendency to become a dry well.

Ronnie brooded. "I can't go back to the Wickers' and just twiddle my thumbs until I'm sixteen. I'm a genius. I've had my picture in magazines and my I.Q. is fabulous."

I filled my pipe. "I, *too*, am a genius."

"Yes, but aged fifty-seven. And you've never really *done* anything."

"It is not necessary for a genius to *do* anything," I said stiffly. "Only the insecure geniuses feel impelled to *do* something."

When Henry Maxterson died nearly one hundred years ago, his will established a trust fund to see Maxtersons through college—specifying one Maxterson at a time. As long as that student took a full course and maintained passing grades, his place could not be preempted by another Maxterson.

Nothing was said about graduation or the length of time that that student could remain at the university.

"How long have you been a student here?" Ronnie asked.

"Approximately thirty-five years."

"Then don't you think it's only fair that you step aside now and let another Maxterson take advantage of the trust?"

"It isn't simply a question of going to college anymore and you know that as well as I do."

The Maxterson fund had been set up to operate for exactly one hundred years—presumably Henry Maxterson's interest in his descendants did not extend for more than a century—and on the day on which it was to be dissolved, the Maxterson then attending the university was to receive the entire principal, providing there still was any, of course.

The administrators of the Maxterson Fund had invested wisely, or at least fortunately, and the trust now totaled in excess of half a million dollars. And it was to be terminated in approximately one year.

I had not, of course, originally intended to remain at the university for thirty-five years.

I received my Bachelor of Arts degree in 1931, but that year the world was bleak and I chose to remain under the

financial mantle of the Maxtersen Fund for my master's and my Ph.D.

When I received the latter, a Democrat still reigned in the White House and it seemed wiser to bide away another year or two until conditions improved. And besides, I had suddenly developed an interest in botany.

Since 1928, I have been away from the university only slightly more than four years. On the morning of December 8, 1941, at the age of thirty-one, I stood waiting at the recruiting station when it opened for business.

I possessed doctorates in history and botany and had acquired a law degree, so quite naturally the army saw fit to put me into the Engineering Corps.

When I returned to the United States at the conclusion of the war, I found that in my absence no one had taken advantage of the Maxtersen Fund.

I enrolled immediately in the School of Engineering. During the years which followed, I acquired a number of additional degrees in a spectrum of fields.

Now I glanced at the clock. It was almost time for my one-thirty class. I gathered together my dietary charts and my analytic theme on the protein content of the ten most popular varieties of cheddar cheese.

Outside, on the dormitory steps, I found Professor Stevenson, the dean of men, in conversation with a remarkably tall student whom even I recognized as one Long Tom McGill, a basketball player.

McGill attends the university on a working athletic scholarship and I have heard rumors that the work consists entirely of entering the administration building twice a month and emptying a wastebasket into the incinerator.

Professor Stevenson is an enthusiastic executive who wears bow ties. He stopped me. "Peter, when are you going to intern?"

"Never," I said firmly.

"But you completed your medical studies last year. And with the highest honors, I might add."

I was adamant. "Nevertheless, I have not the slightest intention of interning."

If I did, the Maxtersen scholarship would, of course, fall vacant and Ronnie would leap into the breach. I had no intention of allowing that to occur now that I was so near to half a million dollars.

Stevenson sighed. "Don't you think you're making things difficult for Ronnie? After all, he wants an education, too."

So the boy had been talking to him? But undoubtedly without mentioning the five hundred thousand dollars looming just beyond the horizon.

Stevenson cleared his throat. "There is the question of the beanie."

"Beanie? What beanie?"

"According to the rules formulated by the students themselves, every freshman here is required to wear a beanie."

I smiled tightly. "I am not a freshman. I received my Bachelor of Arts degree in the days when this university prided itself on scholarship."

Long Tom McGill was impressed. "That long ago?"

Dean Stevenson pursued his point. "Peter, you are now enrolled in the School of Home Economics, are you not?"

I admitted as much. "Your university is running out of subjects."

"And you *are* taking Meal Planning 106? And Basic Oven Technique 137? And American Diet (1620-1860)? *All* freshmen subjects?"

It was evident he had been doing research on me.

He smiled triumphantly. "Then, there you are. For all academic purposes, you *are* a freshman at this time."

"Nevertheless, I refuse to wear a beanie."

The smile became a bit grim. "Peter, if you don't wear the beanie, I'm afraid that I will have to suspend you. Rules are rules, you know, and the students don't like to have them broken. Especially the ones they make themselves."

I saw through the whole thing. Undoubtedly there were hundreds of freshmen who never wore beanies, but Ronnie had called my case to the attention of the dean of men. Both of them were now in union to humiliate me—a primitive form of intimidation—in an attempt to drive me from the university.

I bristled. I would carry this all the way to the Supreme . . . And then reason prevailed. It was wiser to pay the two dollars. I went to the school store and bought a beanie.

When I returned to my room, Ronnie presented an open box of chocolates. "Try one of the swirly ones."

Automatically I complied.

"Have another."

Ronnie watched me consume the two pieces, his eyes speculative. "Do you feel a little stiffness? Any paralysis?"

I stared at him suspiciously. "No. Why?"

He appeared disappointed. "I guess it didn't work."

"What didn't?"

"The curare. It's supposed to paralyze you in twenty seconds and death should come soon after."

I was aghast. He must be joking. "You put curare into the chocolates?"

He smiled.

I experienced a moment of panic, but then pulled myself together. After all, I was still alive, unparalyzed, and he *had* said the poison was curare. *If* he had really put poison into the candy.

I smiled tightly. "There seems to be a gap in your genius. Curare is toxic only when it is introduced into the bloodstream. Taken orally, it is harmless."

"I know," he admitted. "But I was hoping that you might have an active ulcer."

I snatched the box from his hands. "This is going to the university authorities. Perhaps the police."

He remained unperturbed. "I injected curare only into the two pieces you ate. And besides, I'll just deny everything and people will think that you've . . ." He stopped and a film of innocence glided over his eyes.

I studied him. People would suspect that I was losing my mind? Was that it? And once my mental competency was questioned, was it but another step or two to legally pry me from the Maxtersen scholarship?

I smiled firmly and sampled another chocolate. "Try one yourself, Ronnie. They're really quite delicious."

That evening I had difficulty finding sleep and consequently was awake to hear Ronnie's bed creak as he rose.

He tiptoed past my bed, entered the alcove containing our washbasin and closed the door behind him.

I yawned. He was getting a drink of water.

But I did not hear the sound of running water and after ten minutes, the door opened again. Ronnie passed my bed and returned to his own.

I waited until Ronnie resumed sleep and then got up

and went to the washroom. I closed the door behind me and switched on the light.

What had Ronnie been up to?

I opened the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet. The recess contained the usual assortment of drugs—aspirins, cough medicines, and miscellaneous pills that should have been discarded long ago.

Had he tampered with any of them?

Looking down, I noticed traces of white powder on the washbasin. I tasted a fingertip of it gingerly.

Bitter.

I stared at the slight white protrusion from the cold-water tap.

The ingenious little fiend.

He had made whatever poison he was using into a paste and inserted it inside the mouth of the faucet. In the morning, when I turned on the spigot for a glass of water, the poison would spurt into my glass.

I ran cold water until I was certain that the faucet was clear of all the powder.

When our alarm rang in the morning, Ronnie sat up and yawned elaborately.

I was not deceived. He was waiting eagerly.

I strolled to the washbasin and drew a full glass of water. I brought it back. "Would you care for a glass of water?"

Ronnie demurred. "No, thank you."

I drained the glass to the bottom and began dressing.

After a while, Ronnie said, "Is it possible that you are immune to poison?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't be at all surprised."

Ronnie sighed. "Then I'll have to come up with something else." He slipped into his shoes. "Why don't we drop in at the archery range this afternoon?"

I had not the slightest intention of allowing Ronnie within five hundred yards of me while he had a bow and arrow in his hands. "No," I said firmly.

I put on my beanie and left for breakfast.

That evening I noticed that the textbook before Ronnie went unread. His eyes were glazed with the process of deep thought.

I felt rather uneasy about that.

At nine I closed my own books and prepared for my usual evening stroll.

Ronnie switched off his student lamp and put on his jacket.

When he joins me in my walk about the campus, it is his habit to chatter incessantly, but tonight he walked silently.

The smallest sliver of a moon hung in the sky and the campus seemed almost deserted, possibly because there was a basketball game at the fieldhouse.

At the Canoe Club shed, we turned out upon the dock and gazed at the nearly dark waters.

I put a firm hand on one of the pilings. "If you have any devious intentions of pushing me into the water, it is pointless. I am able to swim quite well."

It was a few moments before Ronnie spoke. "I've discovered that it really won't be necessary to kill you after all."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow. "But you certainly tried."

"Not really. There wasn't any curare in the chocolates."

"What about the cyanide—or whatever it was—in the cold-water tap?"

"I ground up a few aspirins and made them into a paste. I also sprinkled some of the powder around so that you would be sure to discover what I did. I knew you were awake and so I acted as suspicious as possible."

I felt relieved. "So you've decided to face facts and leave school?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm going to attend the university under the Maxtersen Fund."

I frowned.

He stared out at the lights across the small lake. "I remembered that my father once said that there were only a handful of Maxtersons in the world. So I went through your wallet when you took a shower this afternoon and found your birth certificate. And later I made a long, distance phone call to Boston, where it was supposed to have been issued, but the Vital Records Department at the city hall there said that nobody named Peter Clayborne Maxtersen was born there on February 26, 1912."

The air seemed cold. Very cold.

Ronnie went on. "And then I remembered that you

write letters to almost no one, but you do keep mailing things like Christmas cards and little presents to a Mrs. Letitia Randall in Spill Falls, Wisconsin."

To my Aunt Letitia. She is now eighty-two and she was my mother because I had none other since the day I was born. She knows me now as Maxterson and she understands.

"So I phoned Spill Falls," Ronnie said. "I talked to the town clerk. I read that, when a person forges a birth certificate, he usually still uses his correct birthdate and sometimes even part of his real name. I found out that a Peter Clayborne *Randall* was born there on February 26, 1912."

I had almost forgotten that I had once called myself Randall.

Ronnie turned toward me. "You've been masquerading as a Maxterson ever since you entered college in 1928."

The Randalls had never had money, but they had minds, and the Maxterson Fund had been the only means by which I had been able to afford the university.

"I'm sorry," Ronnie said, "but I *am* a Maxterson and I'm going to school under the Maxterson Fund."

I found myself sweating. No! Not after all these years. I wouldn't allow it!

My hands shoved automatically.

Ronnie uttered a startled cry and plunged headlong into the dark water.

The wind seemed to rise suddenly and sharply.

From the dark waters, Ronnie cried out again.

To *me*.

I stood there shivering. I, Peter Clayborne *Randall*, age fifty-seven, B.A., B.S., M.A., M.S. . . .

And I was drowning a thirteen-year-old boy.

I swore and tore off my topcoat. I kicked away my shoes and dived into the water.

Ronnie was only a few feet from the dock and I managed to get an arm across his chest and side-stroke back to the docks.

Out of the water, Ronnie coughed and hacked and there was nothing I could do but pat his back until he felt better.

When he could, he spoke. "Well, anyway, you pulled me

out again. That's something." He brushed wet hair from his forehead. "But I don't think you tried to kill me just because of the half a million dollars."

"Didn't I?" I said bitterly. "I can't think of a more solid reason."

He shook his head. "Not for the money. Not really. But because I could stop you from attending the university. And that's what you want to do most in this world, isn't it? Just stay here and study the rest of your life?"

I blinked.

Yes, of course. That was it. I didn't really care about money. I wanted just enough so that I could remain here.

There is something exciting about beginning a new course, a new path of study. There is something reassuring in the constant rediscovery that there have been intelligent men in this world and that some of them have written books.

But that was over now.

I looked back at the dormitory and at the windows on the corner of the third floor. They were dark now, but when the lights were on, the place was my home. As it had been all my adult life.

I sighed. What kind of work can an excessively educated man of fifty-seven find?

Teaching?

People assume that, because one has a thirst for knowledge, one also has the passion to teach.

Frankly, I loathe teaching.

Long Tom McGill picked up the wastebasket.

"Just one moment, please," I said. "The green wastebasket is yours, the red one is mine."

We exchanged baskets and walked to the incinerator chute.

He emptied his wastebasket. "What sport are you going out for?"

"Greco-Roman wrestling," I said.

"I didn't know we had a team."

"I am in the process of organizing one," I said. "However, it may take decades. There is no sense in hurrying these matters and spoiling a good thing."

Outside I inhaled the brisk academic air. It was good to be a student once again after that one miserable year of

teaching. But one had to work to eat—at least until the birth of the Ronald Maxtersen Fund for Senior Athletes,

Upstairs in our room, Ronnie had the chessboard waiting.

I admire Ronnie's perseverance, but rich genius or not, that boy simply cannot play competent chess.